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Environmental groups struggle to boost declining membership

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just as a new and more conservative Republican Congress threatens to roll back environmental regulations, major environmental groups are struggling to stem declining memberships and dwindling contributions.

The financial problems threatening many of the country's environmental organizations was dramatized last week when the 102-year-old Sierra Club, announced a 10 percent cut in staff after losing \$2.9 million over the last four years.

The Wilderness Society, National Wildlife Federation and the National Audubon Society also have faced membership problems and disappointing revenues since the booming growth that accompanied the 20th anniversary of Earth Day nearly five years ago.

But spokesmen for the three conservation groups said the worst

scams to be over with membership either stabilized or rebounding. But even groups with continued growth are uneasy and are re-examining their programs with an eye toward cutting costs and getting the most out of limited resources.

The environmental movement's membership and revenue concerns come at a time when environmentalists are under some of the sharpest attacks in years from conservatives in Congress, property-rights advocates and commercial interests that see environmental regulation as the enemy of economic growth.

This followed two years in which many environmentalists have become complacent, partly because the Clinton administration had put card-carrying environmentalists in many key positions of power. For example: Vice President Al Gore and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt.

But environmentalists found the recently completed 103rd Congress anything but pro-environment. And they fear the new, clearly more conservative Republican-led Congress may try to emasculate environmental laws altogether by hamstringing regulators. A growing number of legislators want to toughen risk assessment requirements and protect property owners from intrusive environmental regulations.

Some environmental leaders suggest the new hostility in Congress may spur membership and contributions, but others see that as little to cheer about.

"It reminds me of a mortician saying it's great that there's a big death wave," says Erik Olson, who follows congressional issues for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a leading environmental group.

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